

BOOK REVIEW

Preventing the Death of Democracy from Within

HARLITUS BERNIAWAN TELAUMBANUA*

Center for Political Studies, University of Indonesia

Email: hberniawantel@gmail.com

Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Broadway Books.

What is more terrifying than to witness the rise of a demagogue through democratic means? In a democracy, this kind of outcome is a nightmare. The book shows in clear terms the two authors' apprehension towards such possibilities. The authors begin with the question of "whether democracy is in danger?". The question does not only inquire into the state of democracy but also highlights the plausibility of the general public and those belonging to the "elite" not realizing the impending dangers being faced. The book's argument is constructed based on a historical analysis on threats against democracy in many parts of the world, including the current state of affairs in the US.

Most people recognize the downfall of democracies around the world in the hands of military leaders. The first wave of democracy (1828–1926) failed amidst the trend of fascism in Italy and Germany and the rise of communism (1922–1942). The second wave of democracy (1943–1962) tumbled against the rise of military regimes where, in Latin America, they were known as the bureaucratic authoritarian regimes (1958–1975). This establishes a pattern of the rising and falling of democracies, but the question remains on whether the "third wave" of democracy—originating in Portugal and gradually spreading to Greece, Spain, Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Eastern bloc

*The author is a researcher at Center for Political Studies (Puskapol) LP2SP FISIP University of Indonesia.

countries throughout the 1980s (Huntington 1991)—has reached its end; where are we in relation to that circumstance?

In *How Democracies Die*, Levitsky and Ziblatt warn the readers on the impending threats against democracy. These threats constitute populist regimes and the electoral victories of extremist factions in Hungary, Turkey, Poland, Austria, France, Germany, Netherlands, and the US. Unlike military leaders who typically undermine democracy through sudden and radical means, these autocrats enter into power and ‘hijack’ democracy through legal means. The destructive outcome is supposedly more impactful as the general public is not always aware of such a calamity and therefore continues to maintain the sense that the country remains democratic. The elites undergo the same state of mind and would often hand out power in political transitions to those dangerous to democracy. Protecting democracy from disastrous circumstances requires both elites and the general public being able to recognize how to identify potential autocrats and their way of hijacking democracy with a relatively similar strategy.

However, it is difficult to identify potential autocrats whose background lacks experience in public office and does not explicitly show antidemocratic tendencies. Levitsky and Ziblatt outlines a set of pointers akin to a litmus test to identify potentially authoritarian leaders. These pointers include (1) rejection of (or lack of commitment to keep) democratic rules; (2) denial against the legitimacy of their opposition; (3) tolerance or encouragement of violence; and (4) readiness to restrict the civil liberties of their opposition, including the media. Fulfilling one or more of these pointers must be handled with caution.

Unfortunately, the US—who had traditionally held the claim as one of the oldest and most successful democratic nations—has failed to prevent the election of an autocrat. In this book, Levitsky and Ziblatt put great attention towards the status of American democracy. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 had led many to assume that democracy in the US is under threat. Such thoughts came into being as Trump had repeatedly demonstrated all four pointers listed above throughout his campaign leading up to his victory: (1) his weak commitment to uphold

democratic norms by continuously putting into question the legitimacy of the election that he regarded as “unfair”; (2) rejecting the legitimacy of his adversary by branding Hillary as a criminal, or describing Obama as a Kenyan-born Muslim; (3) advocating for violence perpetrated by his supporters against those who oppose his policies; and (4) setting in place limits that restrict the civil liberties of his adversaries, of which includes threatening to imprison Hillary and openly threatening news media that shines a negative light on Mr. Trump.

Institutionally, the US has an established constitution and electoral system to safeguard its democracy. However, in reality, these ‘gatekeeping’ measures do not always work sufficiently. The gatekeepers include political parties and their politicians, along with the general public acting as voters; in the American context, these gatekeepers have failed to function due to internal and external forces. Internally, the parties and the politicians had finally allowed an autocrat to enter the fray due to misguided perceptions that they could tame the figure and change the status quo. Furthermore, ideological similarities become paramount to such actions—a condition where the autocrat’s agenda are in line with the platform of the political party and the goals of the politicians themselves. In such a condition, the integrity of these gatekeepers is held under stress—to what extent are they willing to sacrifice their pragmatic ends and ally with their adversaries in order to save democracy.

Externally, the gatekeepers of American democracy have been weakened by two factors. One, the political arena is open for all and indeed very flexible. This is reflected by the large amount of funds circulating in US elections, with Donald Trump as one of these oligarchs elected as president. This is contrary to Winters’ argument that in a civil oligarchy model such as the US, oligarchs do not involve themselves in political competitions. Their way of maintaining wealth is by delegating such tasks to other actors such as accountants, investors, lawyers, and lobbyists (Winters 2011). Two, the emergence of numerous ‘alternative media,’ operating on both the social and mainstream media, acts as vehicles for wannabe autocrats to gain public attention. This is apparent in Trump’s anti-immigrant and white supremacist rhetoric that domi-

nated the news media as well as the internet in the 2016 election. His victory shows that the media has the ability to instill values within an individual. These values would then integrate the individual into the larger public (Herman and Chomsky 1988).

Aside from identifying potential authoritarian despots, Levitsky and Ziblatt push for the need to discover how autocrats plan on hijacking democracy. These 'strategies' include: One, the capture or removal of 'referees', referring to law enforcement and justice institutions. This is reflected in Trump's firing of FBI director James Comey due to his investigations relating to the supposed Russian involvement in the 2016 election, in addition to the firing of federal attorney Preet Bharara for investigating the claims regarding Trump's money laundering scheme. Two, eliminating key political players that could subvert or threaten his claim to power, including his rhetoric against Hillary Clinton and the media such as New York Times, Washington Post, and CNN, accusing them of false reporting. During the first half of his presidency, Trump issued an executive order allowing federal agencies to halt funding for cities that provide sanctuary for illegal immigrants. The last strategy involves changing the rules so as to discourage potential opponents, such as Trump proposing to remove congressional member's ability to filibuster. Trump also formed the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity with the intent to create Voter IDs that consequently makes it difficult for minority groups to vote—mirroring the attempts to restrict voting rights in the Jim Crow era that ended with the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. One last strategy that Trump has not seem to have done is crisis utilization. Crisis situations may be taken advantage of to issue popular decrees that often leads to attempts at reducing restrictions towards presidential powers.

As it stands, America's democratic quality remains one of the best in the world, with systems and political entities that may not exist in other governments. Sociologically, this condition is made possible by the American social roots formed by Anglo-America in the 'new world' under the notion of freedom and equality, two things that they could not obtain in Europe (Tocqueville 1863). Furthermore, Levitsky and

Ziblatt note that US democracy has 'unwritten rules' that is fundamental to the safekeeping of democracy.

The first of these unwritten rules pertains to tolerance. In a political contest, as long as the contestants compete within the boundaries of the Constitution, each side must uphold the view that all individuals possess the same rights to govern and to submit if victory is held by another party. The second rule asserts that all parties must adhere to institutional forbearance; both the executive and legislative branches are equipped with a set of legal powers ordained within the constitution that checks and balances the powers of the other branch. For democracy to run effectively, each party needs to restrain from abusing its powers. These unwritten norms will erode once the elites choose to engage in politics akin to wars and utilize state institutions as weapons to win such wars. In a game meant forever to be played, the players in a democracy needs to prevent themselves from eliminating their opponents. Accordingly, these norms are currently being ignored by US politicians.

The extreme polarization within the public has also threatened the US democracy. The dichotomy of Republicans and Democrats has increasingly led to a division based on religious identity and race instead of policy. The commodification of identity in the 2016 election drove an irrational loyalty towards political parties, where the capacity, policy plans, and past experiences of candidates are sidestepped to give way to collective agitation. The illusion of identity (Sen 2007) is utilized to mobilize interests leading to violence is apparent under Donald Trump.

Talks on Trump's impeachment that has started since mid-2019 may not have been surprising to both Levitsky and Ziblatt. Towards the end of the book, the authors create three possible scenarios in US politics that may occur after Trump's election, one of which is the restoration of democracy due to Trump's policies becoming highly unpopular or impeachment. Trump is considered the fourth president whose administration is subject to impeachment talks after Andrew Johnson (1868), Richard Nixon (1974), and Bill Clinton (1998). Later, the impeachment attempt failed in the Republican-controlled Senate. Levitsky and Ziblatt admit that the possibility that such a scenario could happen is slim.

Despite all that has happened, the current state of US democracy and all analyses presented by the authors are warnings that no regime is safe from the threat of democracy, including Indonesia.

Whether we realize it or not, the recent 2019 election showed that there was an identity hardening that triggered irrational loyalty and was prone to capitalization. Judging from the dynamics that occurred, it can be seen that the 2019 election is a continuation of the dynamics of the presidential election in 2014 and the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election. Similar to what happened in America, voter loyalty is driven more by the issue of identity politics than criticism of the candidates' visions and missions. Instead of arguing with ideas, political mockery between the supporters of both candidates dominated media coverage. Increased social media activity also opens up wider echo chambers for "buzzers". Unfortunately, seen from the efforts to gain support, the capitalization of identity issues has no impact. This strategy is not able to reduce the number of undecided voters, let alone influence voters who have made their choices. It is not surprising that the electability and the number of undecided voters that appear in various poll releases do not show significant differences and changes. Following the election, there have not been any signs of a decrease in the capitalization of identity issues and it is likely that this will continue until the next election. We must understand that democracy in Indonesia has all indications of vulnerability to be infiltrated by demagogues: pragmatic elites, high levels of money flow in elections, increased social media activity as an alternative campaign space, and irrational voter loyalty due to the capitalization of identity issues. If the United States of America, one of the oldest democracies, fails to protect itself from demagogues, Indonesia as a new democracy must certainly be more careful of the threat of democracy, especially if the threat is killing democracy from within.

REFERENCES

- Herman, Edward S., Noam Chomsky. 1988. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books.

- Huntington, Samuel P. 1991. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Levitsky, Steven, Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Sen, Amartya. 2007. *Identity and Violence: The illusion of Destiny*. London: Penguin Books
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. 1863. *Democracy in America*. Cambridge: Sever and Francis.
- Winters, Jeffrey A. 2011. *Oligarchy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

